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U. S. Department of Agriculture

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19 HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT
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NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Keeping House Ferns Contented." Information from W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, U. S. D. A.

Bulletin available: "Home Laundering." Mimeographed Circular: "Care of House Plants."

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"Can you tell me," I asked W.R.B., the Garden Adviser, "what is wrong with my Maidenhair fern? It has a look of discontent. Perhaps it is weary of living in my sunny south window. I am afraid, too, that there are worms working at its roots, because I find holes in the soil every morning. Do you suppose there is something wrong with the soil?"

"Very likely," said the Garden Adviser. "It's a hard problem, to secure suitable soil for potting ferns -- a soil that does not dry out."

"What is a good soil?" I asked.

"The best soil," explained W.R.B., "is a mixture of 3 parts loam, 1 part well-rotted manure, and 1 part leaf mold. If the loam is heavy, and of a clay formation, add 1 part of sharp sand to lighten it."

"What kind of loam is best?" was my next question.

"Loam that is formed from rotted sods is best. You can hasten the decay of the sods by chopping them with a sharp spade or hoe. The manure can be mixed with the sods before chopping. If the sods and manure are dry, add a little water after chopping, or as the pile is turned over. Don't use too much water on the soil. Any more questions?"

"Yes, sir --- what if you were living in a city apartment, and wanted to keep a fern, and you could find no soil for the fern?"

"In that case," said W.R.B., "I'd take the fern to a florist and have him repot it."

"Should ferns be repotted in larger pots?"

"Not always, but if the plants are young and vigorous they will require more root space. In repotting ferns, first remove part of the old soil. If the plants are old ones, remove a part of the roots, too. Place a few pieces

of broken crockery or a few small stones over the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot. Cover these with a thin layer of soil. Place the plant in the middle of the pot, and fill a part of the soil around the roots."

"Have at hand a short stick, about an inch thick, but slightly flattened at one end and use it to pack the soil about the roots of the plant. It is very important that the soil be packed well, around and between the large roots. One reason that house plants die out is that the soil is not well packed about their roots. Add more soil, and continue the packing until the pot or fern pan is filled to within one-half or three-fourths of an inch from the top. Water the fern and keep it out of hot sun and drying winds for a few days."

"How much water does a fern need?" I asked my friend.

"That depends," he told me, "on the time of year, the kind of fern, and whether it is growing fast or is in a period of rest. Take my Maidenhair fern, for example. It is one of the best ferns for house culture. Maidenhair ferns require plenty of water during the spring and summer, but less water during the late fall and early winter, when they are taking a rest. No definite rule can be given, but ferns that are growing should be watered every day, and not allowed to dry out. When ferns are resting, they should be watered only when they become slightly dry, but not dry enough to cause the fronds to wilt. Even when they are growing rapidly, they should not be over-watered --- just enough to keep the soil moist. House ferns are very sensitive to the treatment they receive, and seem to know almost when they are being neglected."

"Do they?" I asked. "Maybe that's the trouble with my Maidenhair fern. I've been too busy to give it much attention lately, and the poor thing is drooping sadly --- pouting, maybe."

"Well," said W.R.B., "I wouldn't go so far as to say that, Aunt Sammy. While we're talking about ferns, will you answer this question on the radio? One of your friends wrote to me, about an insect which appears on the under side of the fern fronds. Tell her that ferns are often troubled by a little insect known as Red Spider, also by thrips -- t-h-r-i-p-s, thrips. Scale insects sometimes get on the leaves but mealy-bug is perhaps the most troublesome of all."

"How shall I tell her to get rid of them?" was my next question.

"Tell her that thrips and Red Spider can usually be gotten rid of by subjecting the fern plants to a fine but rather forceful spray of cold water. Scale insects and mealy-bug can be removed by washing the fronds with a fairly strong soap solution using what is known as fish-oil soap. After using the soap, rinse the plants with clear water to remove the soap. Make a little swab of cotton on the end of a toothpick and use it after dipping in the soap solution to loosen the scale insects and mealy-bug. Treat them rough --- they deserve it."

As I told W.R.B., I did not realize there were so many points to consider in regard to house ferns.

"Yes," he said, "there are all those and a lot more. Take the matter of sunlight and temperature for example. Most ferns will stand plenty of sunlight --- my Maidenhair ferns seem to do best in almost full sunlight. Then there is the question of temperature. For most ferns, 55 degrees at night and 65 to 70 degrees in the daytime, is about right. The temperature of the ordinary furnace-heated dwelling is often too high, and the air too dry for best results with ferns. Pans of water kept on the radiator will help. There really is a lot to learn about the care of house ferns, but it's easy once you get the hang of it, Aunt Sammy."

"Perhaps so," I said. "I wish my fern would perk up and look as cheerful and contented as yours."

"It will," said W.R.B. "I don't claim any credit for our success with ferns. Mrs. B. takes care of the house plants. I would probably forget to water them, until they died of thirst."

I asked W.R.B. whether he had any printed information about ferns; he says he will be glad to send you a page or two of advice about ferns and other house plants.

And not to be behindhand on this matter of giving advice, I'll answer a couple of questions which came in this morning --- apparently a morning-after result of wash-day.

First question -- well, this isn't exactly a weighty question, unless you'd call it a featherweight: "Can pillows be washed without removing the feathers?"

The answer is yes. If you don't want to take the feathers out of the ticks, scrub the pillows in a weak washing soda solution, using a good suds. Use a second suds if necessary. Rinse in lukewarm water. Change the rinse water two or three times. Squeeze out as much water as you can. Dry the pillows on a sheet in a warm place -- in the sun, if possible. Beat the pillows occasionally while they're drying.

Now there's another method of washing pillows. Perhaps it's a better method. Transfer the feathers to a muslin bag, two or three times the size of the pillow ticking. To do this, sew the edges of the openings of the ticking and the bag together, and shake the feathers from one into the other. Wash and dry the bag of feathers in the same way the whole pillow was washed in the first method. After the ticking has been washed separately, apply a very stiff starch mixture to the inside, with a sponge. This closes the pores of the material, and keeps the feathers from working through. Refill the ticking in the same way it was emptied.

Next question: "Can you send me a recipe for making starch?"

I'll send you the bulletin on "Home Laundering." It contains good general directions for making starch. And don't forget, when you starch clothes, to starch them wrong side out. Leave them wrong side out, till they're sprinkled. For white clothes, use the starch as hot as you can stand it. Why? Because hot starch goes through the fabric better and more evenly, and doesn't leave

shiny spots when ironed. Keep most of the starch hot. Use only part of it at a time. Replace it when it gets cold and thick. The ideal method of starching is to have two pans of starch, besides the reserve supply. Dilute one with enough water to make a good paste for the thinner materials, and keep the other thick enough for the heavier clothes.

Begin by starching the garments you want stiffest. Clothes wrung very dry before starching will be stiffer than wet ones. White starch shows plainly when used on dark colored clothes. It may be tinted with tea or coffee for browns, and with bluing for blues, or specially tinted products may be purchased. Dry all colored garments in the shade. Be sure they are wrong side out. Take the colored clothes off the line as soon as they are dry.

Goodness, our time is up. But I'll answer some more of your questions tomorrow. And give you a dinner menu.

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